

Population Policy Issues

Rationale for a government population policy

by Katharine Betts

In 1945, Arthur Calwell was sworn in as Australia's first Minister for Immigration. The country had just emerged from a terrible war in which invasion by Japan had seemed imminent and Calwell, and the Government to which he belonged,

“At the least a national population policy should have a numerical goal...”

believed that Australia must increase its population and thus boost its capacity to defend itself.

Calwell proposed that Australia should aim for a growth rate of two percent per annum — half from natural increase and half from immigration. One might claim that this scheme represented a population policy of sorts (in that it included natural increase as well as immigration) were it not for the fact that it lacked any notion of an end point or goal. Calwell had decided on two percent because he believed that this was the maximum that Australia, or any other country, could manage to absorb each year. If he had believed a higher rate of growth to have been practical he would have advocated it. The country was to grow in order to enhance its defense capacity but there was no notion of what order of size would be big enough: in 1972, in order to rebut the zero population growth movement, he said, “Australians are the best people in the world, so may their tribe, like that of Abou Ben Adhem,

increase.” (Naturally migrants were also Australians; after all it was Calwell who coined the term “new Australians.”)

Eventually the development of nuclear weapons rendered mere numbers obsolete as a contribution to the nation's defense, but the growth which was designed as a defense policy had acquired a momentum of its own. It has persisted since the 1950s despite the lack of any explicit policy framework. The immigration program lacks a clear statement of its purpose. This was clear when the *How Many Australians?* conference was held in 1971. Sixteen years later, in 1988, the FitzGerald Committee still felt obliged to recommend that the Government develop a clear rationale for immigration. But it is not just that immigration lacks a national objective, it exists without any broader policy framework. The country does not have a population policy,¹ and neither do the major political parties.²

In March 1996 the Australian Labor Party (ALP), which had governed for 13 years, was defeated by a coalition of the two major conservative parties (the Liberal Party, the senior partner, and the National Party) led by John Howard. But, as of mid-1997, the country still lacks a population policy. Why is this?

Some immediate answers may be gleaned from the literature. Sheila Newman reports that before the March 1996 election a spokesman for the Liberal Party told her that while population was a “new and emerging issue” he was concerned that some members of the public would perceive a population policy as draconian. They could imagine that it would involve something like China's one-child policy.³ And John Coulter reports that, early in 1996, Senator Hill, the new Coalition Minister for the Environment, did not see developing a population policy as a priority. He believed that his Government's approach would be “to manage the consequences of population growth as it occurs.”⁴

In March 1997 the Minister for Immigration for the Coalition Government, Philip Ruddock, explained that he felt that the Government did not

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need a population policy. Under his administration the official immigration program had fallen and Australia's population was set to stabilize at 23 million.

There was much that was sensible in Ruddock's speech but, unfortunately, the numbers which he used were wrong. The real intake figures are nearly twice as high as those he referred to and, rather than stabilizing at 23 million, the population is set to grow to 28 million and beyond.⁵ The ALP is now showing some signs of trying to develop a population policy but these moves are hedged around by promises to protect family reunion and humanitarian migration. They even suggest that the official figures could be reduced by not counting the growing numbers of people coming in from New Zealand.⁶

The ALP were the party of Government from 1983 to 1996; they were led by Bob Hawke from 1983 to 1991 and by Paul Keating from 1992 to March 1996. It was the ALP which presided over the resurgence of mass immigration in the late 1980s; if they do now develop a population policy it will be after a long history of avoiding the question. For example at the 1994 United Nations population conference in Cairo they dismissed the need for a population policy on the grounds that: "a formal statement of policy would not be appropriate for Australia, given ...[the] diversity of community views as to the character and objectives of such a policy."⁷

Since 1991 a number of groups and individuals⁸ have begun to argue quite strongly that Australia should have a population policy. They argue that it is not enough to have an immigration policy set according to short-term political and economic goals but which nonetheless drives the country's demographic future. Immigration should be put into a broader context; this context should determine immigration rather than immigration determining the context.

The upshot of the present circumstances is that we have a de facto or implicit population policy which occurs as an unplanned and almost unintended consequence of the annual intake figures.

What should a population policy consist of?

At the least a national population policy should have a numerical goal, a larger figure that we are

aiming to grow toward and stabilize at (or a smaller figure which we are trying to reach through a gradual easing of the overall numbers). It should also have something to say about population distribution; numbers which may be manageable in one setting can cause environmental, economic or social problems in another. But numbers and their distribution are only a means to an end; the long-term quality survival of a human population in Australia.⁹ Clearly there are value judgments involved in the term "quality" which I will not pursue here, but few present Australians would be interested in fostering a population policy which increased numbers to a maximum which could only be maintained at a bare subsistence level, with no margin for education, research, care of the disabled or for foreign aid.

The United Nations' definition of a population policy is:

*...Measures and programs designed to contribute to the achievement of economic, social, demographic, political and other collective goals through affecting critical demographic variables, namely the size and growth of the population, its geographic distribution (national and international) and its demographic characteristics...*¹⁰

Geoffrey McNicoll puts it more succinctly. A population policy as "a coherent vision of the desired demographic future and a co-ordinated set of actions designed to move toward it."¹¹

After a careful and extensive analysis of a range of effects of population growth, Doug Cocks concludes that Australia's interests, and the world's interests, would be best served by our aiming to stabilize our population as soon as possible (a strategy which would take us to about 20 million people by the 2030s).¹² Australian readers may or may not be convinced by his arguments and his particular working numbers. But even if we prefer a different number and a different time frame, the list of policy instruments which he identifies is useful. They include: immigration policy, natural increase policy, tourist and visitor policy, overseas aid policy, internal migration policy, and education policy.

Arguments for and against having an explicit population policy

ARGUMENTS FOR:

One argument for having a population policy is that around the world today most countries do have

such a policy. (Of course, a counter argument would be that most *developed* countries do not.) If we are going to decide on whether to have a policy or not on the basis of following the herd, it then becomes a question of which herd do you choose to follow? Either way this does not seem a promising line of reasoning.

It could, however, be argued that it is more necessary to have a population policy in a country with an active immigration policy. A libertarian might argue that you could be *laissez faire* about demography if you could assume that future populations were reflecting the individual will to procreate and survive. This would be a fallacious argument because it would presume that what people wanted for themselves, say three children or none, was the same as what they wanted in the aggregate, say a population of 40 million in 2041 (and growing) or a population of 10 million (and contracting), but it would make some sense to at least pause and discuss that argument. But once the people's representatives have made a commitment to actively bringing in immigrants, it seems odd to proceed with this active and explicit immigration policy without an overall goal.

Indeed, it may be dangerous. While many opinion leaders in the media and the universities continue to support it, immigration is unpopular. In September 1996, 71 percent of people polled said the immigration intake was too large. The Coalition did cut the intake in mid-1996 and again in mid-1997 but, in May 1997, 64 percent said that it was too large. In the early 1960s, only 20 percent of Australians held this view.¹⁴ This unpopularity may in part be due to the program being seen as a response to special interest groups rather than as a policy firmly grounded in the nation's needs.

For most of the post-War years the major political parties have held to a gentleman's agreement not to discuss immigration or to make it an election issue. In 1996 this agreement was rudely broken by a new politician, independent back-bencher Pauline Hanson.¹⁵ In September Hanson delivered her maiden speech. Among other claims, she asserted that Aborigines were being treated over-generously by the Federal Government, that the proportion of Asians in our migration intake should be reduced, and that there should be a short-term freeze in immigration.

An AGB McNair poll taken in the wake of this

speech found that 62 percent supported the idea of a short-term freeze on immigration and that 53 percent wanted to reduce the proportion of Asians in the intake. These attitudes were much stronger among Coalition voters and among people of low incomes.

In April 1997 Hanson published an extraordinarily controversial book, *The Truth*, which was declared to be out of print almost as soon as it was released, and she launched her own political party, One Nation. One Nation's support in the polls moved quickly to nine percent but then fell to six percent. However it, and its leader, continue to

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attract an astonishing degree of media coverage, almost all of it condemnatory. Hanson is portrayed as a racist, even a fascist, and street protests against her have intensified. They have now become violent. On July 7, Keith Warburton, unemployed and aged 59, attended a One Nation party meeting in a Melbourne outer-suburb. He was not a member of the party but wanted to learn more about its policies on unemployment. As he left he was attacked by anti-racist vigilantes and taken to a hospital with a fractured skull. Protesters and police now routinely outnumber supporters at One Nation meetings.

If we were to have a population policy some of this tension could be avoided and the energy that is now being expended on accusations of racism and counter-accusations of McCarthyism could be put to more productive purposes.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST:

Developing a policy which is written down on paper might be seen as an end in itself. Once this was done nothing else might happen. The Australian Democrats have had a written population policy for some time without this noticeably affecting their actions.¹⁷ The Australian Conservation

Foundation developed such a policy in 1993, again with little tangible result. Might a written national population policy just become a device to calm the critics and avoid action?

Developing a population policy could bring to the surface underlying disagreements about the nature of Australian society and the kinds of futures we would prefer: this after all is the gist of the Keating Government's position at Cairo in 1994.

This argument finds some backing from interpretations of elite theory which argue that, in

role in such societies but life is dangerous and violent. Most people, if they could choose, would opt for the quiet and stability provided by a consensually unified elite. But one of the prices to be paid for this stability is that divisive questions which could mobilize large sections of the non-elite to take direct action must be kept off the agenda.

Australia has a consensually unified elite.²¹ The question then becomes, if we were to formulate a population policy, would the facade of democracy crumble and would we be pitchforked into a Hobbesian world of the war of all against all? Surely not. When the elite theorists say "leave elites alone" they do not mean that we should never try to influence Governments or try to persuade them to turn their attention to new policy areas. (Their meaning is much broader. It boils down to: Don't try to impose inappropriate forms of government on countries with the wrong sort of elite structure and don't try to take social privileges away from elites. This won't make them nicer, more democratic and

accountable; it will have the opposite effect.)²² Indeed elite theorists themselves emphasize the need not just for population control, but for smaller populations in developed countries.²³

But it is true to say that population and immigration questions do not fit onto the conventional left-versus-right political spectrum. And that this makes them risky

questions for politicians who are accustomed to dealing with their electorate on a left-versus-right basis.²⁴ But many issues which concern us (euthanasia, environmentalism, abortion, feminism, anti-racism, gay rights, animal liberation, drugs, and so on) are neither left-wing nor right-wing (in the sense of state intervention in markets versus free-range market forces). If elites are to maintain their consensual unification they have to deal with such questions. Since September 1996 Hanson has delivered a jolt to accepted standards of civil inattention to social questions not approved for our discussion. It now seems that not having a population policy may be every bit as divisive as having one might be.

We are, after all, witnessing an extraordinary

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the interests of political stability, elites must limit political debate to a narrow range of economic topics.¹⁸ Consensually unified elites provide the most stable form of government,¹⁹ a form of government which maximizes personal safety, orderly administration and freedom under the law.²⁰

But this peace and stability is brittle. It depends on political elites (and other leaders of powerful interest groups) developing bonds of trust with each other. It also depends on restricting the range of issues which is brought for public contest to those which do not excite much passion among the members of the non-elite. The trust between members of the elite creates stability, but it depends on their agreeing to ignore a range of questions which concern the public.

In contrast, members of disunified power elites cannot trust each other and always have to keep their followers mobilized and ready to defend them. (These non-elite followers and supporters may be unionists, members of ethnic or religious groups, business interests, farmers and so on.) In a sense, members of the non-elite play a more significant

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level of passion. Hanson's supporters are often elderly. If they wish to attend meetings they must run the gauntlet of jeering youths outside. These scenes are shocking but the tone of the media commentary is also extreme.

The expatriate art critic, Robert Hughes, has used the crudest biological analogies to describe Hanson's beliefs.²⁵ A national newspaper columnist is moved by her remarks on racial targeting in migration selection to tell us that:

Bigotry was enshrined in our Constitution, in our laws. Bigotry was central to our immigration and foreign policies. ... [and] Racism is deeply embedded in our culture and can rise like a phoenix — or, rather, a vulture — with the slightest stimulus. [and

*with the election of the Coalition in March 1996 we have returned to tub-thumping, boong-bashing populism...*²⁶

Another agonizes over the "dark and primitive urges" which Hanson has released.²⁷ The former Prime Minister, Paul Keating, has announced that hankering after a monoculture is not only hopeless, divisive and economically harmful, it is worse than ignorance, prejudice, fear and racism.²⁸ And a notable Australian author has said Pauline Hanson has put us on a train to Auschwitz.²⁹

The level of hyperbole is strong. For example, the evil yearnings for a monoculture which Keating discerns may be no more than a desire for a sense of peoplehood, coupled with weariness among old and new Australians with the insistence on ethnic labels. But the vehemence and exaggeration suggest that we may risk more social division by refusing to develop a population policy than we might engender by giving the matter some serious consideration.

After all, if we ignore population policy and leave our demography to be a by-product of short-term vested interests, we will indeed be staying on a train that is taking us to an uncertain destination. I am convinced that the destination is not Auschwitz but it could be New York, or Los Angeles. Later it might get to be Mexico City. In the very end, if we

still refused to give the driver any directions, it could draw in to Lagos or Kinshasa. (And one of the many disagreeable features of the stops toward the end of the line is that they lack consensually unified political elites. Hobbes would understand the conditions in the streets of Lagos very well.)

Two arguments against having a population policy have been identified here, one short and the other longer. The short argument is that developing a policy could be an excuse for doing nothing. Against this we could argue that it is harder for a Government to ignore its written policies than it is for minor parties or non-government organizations. The longer answer is that developing a policy could undermine democracy. This must be balanced against two arguments for having such a policy:

refusing to discuss population directions may be more dangerous than open debate, and not doing anything about these directions may be even worse.

Why Doesn't Australia Have a Population Policy?

Perhaps this lapse is simply due to a postmodern aversion to goals and

purpose? This is unlikely. Beyond embracing globalism and the Internet, and talking of a postmodern republic, postmodernism does not seem to have had an impact on the policy elite. (Indeed, a consensually unified elite would find postmodern precepts a much harder challenge than any offered by Pauline Hanson.) Possibly the theory is that the existing implicit policy of continual growth through immigration is in the national interest but the electorate is incapable of understanding this? This explanation looks weak. For seven years the Bureau of Immigration research labored on an answer to the question about the economic effects of immigration and population growth. In 1995, it produced a booklet summarizing its work.³⁰ This claims that the research has shown that the economic effects are very small: perhaps negative, perhaps positive, perhaps neutral. No one asserts that the Bureau was biased against growth and, as it is now dissolved, this conclusion is its final word on the topic. The case that the economic effects are

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strongly positive has been given the best chance to assert itself and it has failed.

Doug Cocks provides a good up-to-date summary of a wider range of effects, one that strives hard to be as open as possible to the pro-growth position and, on balance, he concludes that the case for stability is stronger.³¹ Doubtless the matter will not rest here but a great deal of work has now been carried out on the pros and cons of growth and no serious author has produced a strong case to the effect that growth is obviously in the majority interest. Many other authors, particularly environmentalists, have presented a strong case that it is against the majority interest.

Tim Flannery offers a third possible explanation: politicians fear that a population policy would give too much power to scientists.³² Indeed, as Coulter's description of the Australian Democrats' difficulty in coming to terms with their population policy shows, a population policy is a greedy policy. It has implications for, and sets limits to, many other policy areas. It also invades a range of value-laden areas, sexual behavior, women's rights, nationalism, ethnicity, humanitarianism, as well as debates between economic rationalists (who tend to be cornucopians) and environmentalists (who do not). It is not just a question of a range of interest groups with material gains and losses at stake. A population policy would involve all of us in discussions about basic values. Ignoring it and leaving demographic outcomes to fate may seem less troublesome in the short term.

Another possible explanation is simply ignorance. Maybe neither the politicians nor the general public understand demography and therefore, while they are prey to odd fears from time to time, the overall policy domain is not an area of interest to them. This has some plausibility. Moreover, developing a policy would mean hard work and research. It is much easier to emote about multiculturalism and racism and the purity of one's own moral position than it is to do demographic, environmental, social and economic research. Besides, demographic changes make their effects known relatively slowly, over a five- to ten-year span at least. The Government which induces growth may well be out of office before the effects of its decisions begin to be felt.

Ignorance of demography and the fear which fuels our present troubles may go hand in hand. In

a cogent analysis of the present state of demographic alarm, Duncan Campbell draws attention to our general level of ignorance. He asks: "How Asian are we going to become as a result of given annual levels of net intake of Asian peoples? ... It is at this critical point that resentment and fear have entered the picture, because the community has no way of judging what the future population will be. The debate is running open-ended, without terms of reference, and immigration is really only a sub-issue..."³³

There are, of course, many numbers in the public arena but the level of dissension and distrust is such that people often do not understand them or do not believe them. For example, a print journalist reports that when a television interviewer "confronted ... [Hanson] with figures showing that only 866,224 of Australia's more than 18 million people are of Asian origin, Ms. Hanson was blunt. 'I don't believe those figures,' she said, 'They are paper figures.'"³⁴ Such distrust is understandable in a situation where the figures lack a policy context which would, for example, make it clear that 30,000 immigrants a year was a small number and 80,000 a large one. Campbell argues that an explicit population policy would remove the feeling that the situation is open-ended and out of control and that it would return us to our more accustomed levels of civility.

There is merit in many of these explanations but there is another which can be gleaned from Doug Cocks' work.³⁵ Cocks says the existing implicit policy is not in the national interest. If we were to have an explicit policy this fact could not be hidden. Knowledge of this would either alienate the general public or, if it induced a change in direction, this change would alienate the special interest groups now profiting from the status quo.

It is for this reason, he says, that no Government wants to make the process public and explicit. Why should the policy-elite broadcast to the community that the common good is taking second place to sectional interests? Followers of the television series *Yes Prime Minister* will see that this situation is indeed a good reason for the politicians' bipartisan "no-policy" policy.

To this we could add the fact that elite values on questions of immigration and national identity really do differ quite sharply from those of the non-elite. When policy makers are promoting growth

they are not necessarily being cynical pawns of shady influence brokers — many of them believe in what they are doing. But without a population policy they cannot present evidence to the Australian people that their values and beliefs are founded on anything other than mere cosmopolitan prejudice.

NOTES

¹ See G. McNicoll, "Institutional impediments to population policy in Australia," *Journal of the Australian Population Association*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1995, p.101; D. Cocks, *People Policy*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1996, pp.21-22.

² See S. Newman, "Population policy of Australian political parties — explicit and implicit," *People and Place*, vol. 3, no. 4, 1995, pp.46-52.

³ *ibid.*, p.50.

⁴ J. Coulter, "A biologist in the Senate," *People and Place*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1996, p.1.

⁵ Ruddock's speech is reprinted in *People and Place*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1997, pp.6-13. See also the demographic critiques provided by C. Young and K. Betts in that same issue.

⁶ D. Kerr, "The Australian Labor Party's views on population policy," *People and Place*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1997, pp.13-18.

⁷ *Australia: National Report on Population for the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo, 1994*, Australian Government Publishing Service (AGPS), Canberra, 1994, p.7.

⁸ See G. Withers, *Population Issues and Australia's Future: Environment, Economy and Society (National Population Council, Population Issues Committee)*, AGPS, Canberra, 1991, pp.122-123; B. Jones, *Australia's Population "Carrying Capacity": One Nation — Two Ecologies, Report by the House of Representatives Standing Committee for Long Term Strategies*, AGPS, Canberra, 1994, p.19; Australian Academy of Science, *Population 2040: Australia's Choice*, Australian Academy of Science, Canberra, 1994, p.136; T.F. Flannery, *The Future Eaters: An Ecological History of the Australasian Lands and People*, Reed, Sydney, 1994, p.373; D. Cocks, *People Policy*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1996, p.200ff.; McNicoll, 1995, op. cit.

⁹ See Cocks, 1996, op. cit., p.306 and *passim*.

¹⁰ Quoted in *ibid.*, p.21.

¹¹ McNicoll, 1995, op. cit., p.97.

¹² Cocks, 1996, op. cit., pp.180-189, 218.

¹³ *ibid.*, pp.218-220.

¹⁴ K. Betts, "Immigration and public opinion in Australia," *People and Place*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1996, pp.9-20.

¹⁵ For an account of Hanson's extraordinary political

career see R. J. Stove, "The iron lady down under," *Chronicles*, July 1997, pp.2-23.

¹⁶ AGB McNair, sample 2060, nationwide, Telephone, November 1-3, 1996.

¹⁷ See Coulter, 1996, op. cit. The Australian Democrats are a minority party but, along with an independent, Senator Brian Harradine, they hold the balance of power in the Senate.

¹⁸ See I. McAllister, *Political Behaviour: Citizens, Parties and Elites in Australia*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1992, p.16. McAllister argues that there are deeply divisive questions which, in the interests of stability, must be kept off the political agenda. He takes this idea from elite theory. See, for example, G. L. Field and J. Higley, *Elitism*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1980, pp.37,72,117,129.

¹⁹ See Field and Higley, 1980, op. cit.; J. Higley, D. Deacon and D. Smart, *Elites in Australia*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1979.

²⁰ See Field and Higley, 1980, op. cit., pp.48-51.

²¹ See Higley et al., 1979, op. cit., p.264.

²² See *ibid.*, p.6, and Field and Higley, 1980, op. cit., pp.50,52.

²³ See J. Higley, G. L. Field and K. Grøholt, *Elite Structure and Ideology: A Theory with Applications to Norway*, Universitetsforlaget, Oslo and Columbia University Press, New York, 1976, p.358.

²⁴ See McNicoll, 1995, op. cit., p.105; K. Betts, *Ideology and Immigration: Australia 1976 to 1987*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1988, pp.49-51.

²⁵ Hughes describes them as "these burps and farts from the deep gut of Australian racism," quoted in John Ellicott, "PM welched on promise: Hughes," *The Australian*, 2 December 1996, p.5.

²⁶ P. Adams, "Our bigotry has never been silenced," *The Australian: Weekend Review Section*, October 12-13, 1996, p.2.

²⁷ H. Mackay, "Visionary leadership will bring out the tribe's worthier urges," *The Australian*, November 12, 1996, pp.1,2.

²⁸ See material quoted in M. Steketee, "Hanson view compounds a myth: Keating," *The Australian*, November 12, 1996, pp.1,2.

²⁹ T. Keneally, on a program presented by Rod Sharp, produced by Mark Ray, BBC Radio 5, broadcast October 31, 1996.

³⁰ Lynne Williams, *Understanding the Economics of Immigration*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.

³¹ See Cocks, 1996, op. cit., pp.180-189.

³² T. Flannery, address to a public forum, "Australia Overpopulated?" Friday, August 18, 1995, University of

Melbourne.

³³ D. Campbell, "Just how big a nation should we aim to be?", *The Australian*, Oct. 15, 1996, p.13.

³⁴ D. D. McNicoll, "Wise up, Aboriginal women warn 'young' Ms. Hanson," *The Australian*, Oct. 21, 1996, p.3.

³⁵ See Cocks, op. cit., pp.28-30.

How Reliable Are the Immigration Figures in Britain?

by Peter Tompkins

Winston Churchill MP has just made a speech casting doubt on Home Office immigration statistics. And while I do not necessarily agree with all he says, his essential point about the level of immigration to [Britain] being a great deal higher than admitted by the Home Office is entirely accurate.

For ten years I was head of the UK immigration service. I have long known that the Home Office statistics bear no relation at all to the true facts on immigration.

The Home Office states that in the five years to 1993, 264,500 people from outside these shores settled in Britain. In contrast, the actual rate was 625,000 — more than twice the official one. Instead of around 50,000 a year getting here on average, as the Home Office claims, the true figure works out at more than 100,000 per year.

The Home Office may like to assume that illegal immigrants dutifully queue up, buy an airline ticket home, and leave our shores the moment their permitted time here is over — but the assumption is untrue. Most simply remain in this country as *de facto* settlers, without being recorded as such. The Home Office cannot therefore continue to pretend that its figures are accurate.

The actual rate of immigration belies the official statistics, making Home Office policy severely flawed. There should be an open debate about the scale, and the long-term consequences, of immigration.

On these points I agree with Mr. Churchill.

Excerpts from a column in
the Australian edition of
UK Mail (The International Daily Mail)
February 13-19, 1995